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Lasting relationships despite project ending

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Abstract
Ending of business-to-business relationships has got increased interest among researchers during the last decade. Even though research on business-relationship ending has increased, still little attention has been devoted to the relationship 'aftermath stage', i.e. what happens when trading has stopped in a business relationship. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to elaborate further on the business-relationship aftermath stage. We focus especially on business relationships that are designed to end at a specific time, and ask why some of these relationships are re-activated again.

The empirical base consists of a study of two different construction projects, which were located in different regions but involved the same building contractor, and were ordered by the same buyer (a retail chain). In the two construction projects totally 81 material suppliers or sub-contractors we involved. Of these 5 suppliers and 5 sub-contractors were the same in the two projects. The ending date for the first project (*Project Stockholm*) and the start date for the second project (*Project Uppsala*) was about one year, thus making it possible to study the aftermath stage for the ten relationships that were re-activated for the second project.

Keywords
Ending, business relationships, aftermath, project

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1. Introduction

Ending of business-to-business relationships has got increased interest among researchers during the last decade (for review see Havila & Tähtinen, 2010). As that study shows, the most common research topics have been the triggers or reasons for ending (see, e.g., Gedeon et al., 2009; Hallén & Johanson, 2004; Helm, 2004; Holmlund & Hobbs, 2009; Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005; Perrien et al., 1995; Pressey & Selassie, 2007; Tuusjärvi & Blois, 2004). However, most studies within the field of business relationships have concentrated on the development and expansion stages, and often show that business relationships are long-lasting (see e.g. Ford *et al.*, 1998; Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995).

Even though research on business-relationship ending has increased, still little attention has been devoted to the relationship 'aftermath stage', i.e. what happens when trading has stopped in a business relationship. In the existing studies, common view on relationship ending is to see it as a dissolution process, where the last stage is the aftermath stage. For example, Alajoutsijärvi et al. (1998) discuss dissolution quality during the different stages and point out that it is not only the uncoupling actors that perceive the outcome quality, but also other actors connected to those ending their relationship. Also Tidström & Åhman (2006) use the dissolution process view, and find that during the 'post-ending stage' (i.e. aftermath stage) the former business partners still continued to discuss with each other during annual meetings and trade fairs. Two studies that especially deal with the aftermath stage are Harrison (2004) and Havila & Wilkinson (2002). Harrison (2004) studies a situation when the business relationship was unilaterally terminated by one of the parties and how this led to a reaction from the other party who wanted to continue the relationship. Havila & Wilkinson (2002), in turn, study relationships that end due to external circumstances that weaken the logic of the relationship. What they show is that social bonds that are created during a business relationship may travel further with the people to other organizations. Thus, we still know little about the time after trading has stopped in a business relationship.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate further on the business-relationship aftermath stage. One reason why few relationship-aftermath studies can be found is probably the methodological difficulties involved in studying this stage. It might be difficult for the

researchers to find people who have been involved in the terminated relationship. It may also be so that the companies are unwilling to talk about something that perhaps ended in a less good way. Therefore, we focus on business relationships that are designed to end at a specific time. One setting where relationships normally have an end-date is those industries that rely on a public (see, e.g., Camén et al., 2001 regarding public transport) or competitive tendering process (see, e.g., Bengtson, 2003 regarding construction industry). In this type of setting the parties sign a contract with clear start- and end-dates. The question is what happens with the business relationship after the expiring date? Do they continue to exist, and in that case why?

We will use a study of two different construction projects, which were located in different regions but involved the same building contractor, and were ordered by the same buyer (a retail chain). According to Dubois & Gadde (2000), a difference between the construction industry and many other industries is that the construction industry still relies on standardized parts rather than standardized activities. The absence of customized products calls for considerable adjustments at the individual construction site in order to adapt to the requirements of the specific building, which in its turn emphasizes the need for a decentralized structure, focusing on individual projects. The primary driver of efficiency in the structure is "a strong adherence to competitive tendering" which, to complete the cycle, leads to fewer product adaptations (*ibid.*). In the two construction projects totally 81 material suppliers or sub-contractors we involved. Of these 5 suppliers and 5 sub-contractors were the same in the two projects. The ending date for the first project (*Project Stockholm*) and the start date for the second project (*Project Uppsala*) was about one year, thus making it possible to study the aftermath stage for the ten relationships that were re-activated for the second project.

The paper is outlined in the following way: We will start by exploring the project concept, as well as the concepts of business relationships, networks, and relationship disengagement. Thereafter we will move on to a short description of the empirical base. After a discussion of possible reasons why some relationships survive the project end-date and others do not, we will end with some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

The theoretical part of the paper includes three different areas; project literature, literature on networks of business relationships, and literature on relationship disengagement.

2.1 Projects: Business Relationships with End-Dates

According to traditional project management literature, one of the most prominent features of projects is that they have specific start and end-dates. Therefore, they are *'…a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service, or result'* (Project Management Institute, 2004, p. 5). This also implies that a project can be clearly defined and separated from "the whole". Lundin (1995) claims that a project is "the successful result of separating the realization of a task from its environment", while Løwendahl (1995) defines a project as "a specific finite task to be accomplished". This main feature, that projects are something specific that can be separated out, entails other special characteristics. Some of these are: a clear purpose, well-defined end-results, a life-cycle (including project start-up, growth, decline and termination), interdependencies between projects and between project and parent organization, and last, but not least, some elements that are unique (so that the project cannot be reduced to routines within the parent company) (Meredith & Mantel, 2000). Or, as Lundin & Söderholm (1995) put it, time, task, team and transition are important concepts. A temporary organization is limited in time, in the number of (clearly defined) tasks it encompasses, in the number of people taking part, and it is often a means to achieving some sort of change in the organization (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995:438-439). In an analogous manner Packendorff (1995:320) defines a project as a unique, once-in-a-lifetime task, with a predetermined date of delivery, that is being subject to one or several performance goals (such as resource usage and quality), and consists of a number of complex and/or interdependent activities.

Packendorff (1995) also makes a clear distinction between the project as a tool and as a temporary organization. We would, however, like to take the discussion one step further. It is not enough to separate between projects and temporary organizations if we want to understand what makes relationships survive the end of a project. According to Packendorff (1995:328), if a project is seen as a temporary organization, there will be an interactivity between expectations, action and learning, but all of this takes place *within the predefined project time*. Kasvi et al. (2003) point out that even though new knowledge is created during a

project, it is not always used efficiently afterwards. Few authors discuss what takes place once the task is fulfilled, i.e. when the project is finished. An exception would be Hellgren & Stjernberg (1995), who discuss project networks as means to design and implement major investments. In their conceptual framework, a project network is defined as "(1) a set of relations, where no single actor may act as legitimate authority for the network as a whole, (2) where the network is open in the sense that there are no definite criteria by which the boundary of the network may be identified and controlled, and (3) where the network is temporally limited, dynamically changing and (partially) reconstructed from one project to the next" (Hellgren & Stjernberg, 1995:379). The authors' parenthesis, "partially", is what will be examined further in this paper: Projects are designed to end, and thus the business relationships that are created within the frame of the project should meet the same fate.

2.2 Networks of Business Relationships

If projects can be seen as temporary organizations with end-dates, networks of business relationships are instead developed over a long period of time and long-lasting in nature (see e.g. Håkansson, 1982; Axelsson & Easton, 1992; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Ford *et al*. 1998; Håkansson *et al*. 2009). According to this perspective, firms are engaged in activities that are carried out across firm boundaries, activating resources not only within one firm, but at different places within the network. Rather than being regarded as isolated entities, firms are considered to be interdependent and bound together in a network (Håkansson & Snehota, 1989). The interdependency, or the fact that one firm needs other firms in order to carry out its activities, also entails uncertainty – your success does not solely depend on you, but also on the firms you are interacting with. Long-lasting relationships, where you know your counterparts, are one way to come to terms with these interdependencies.

However, not all business relationships are long-lasting. Some have a planned end-date and some are deliberately terminated by one or both of the parties. Halinen & Tähtinen (2002) divide relationships in three categories: continuous, terminal and episodic. Continuous relationships do not have a planned end-date, and none of the parties plan to terminate the relationship. This is the case regarding the second category, the terminal relationships. Here the parties wish to end the relationship as soon as possible. Episodic relationships are established for a certain purpose and time. One example of episodic relationships would be relationships that start after a tendering process where the counterpart is selected based on

certain predefined criteria. In these cases it is the contract signed by the parties that define the contents and length of the relationship (Camén et al., 2011). Thus, these types of relationships seem to be those ones normally created within the frame of a project. The question is if there are some types of episodic relationships that survive the project ending and become reactivated in new episodes?

2.3 Relationship Disengagement

Even though networks of business relationships are developed over time and from one point of view can be considered stable, they are at the same time dynamic and constantly changing (Ford et al., 2006). Part of this change can be contributed to the end of certain relationships within the network. During the last decade, several studies on relationship disengagement have been conducted (see e.g., Tähtinen, 2001; Havila & Wilkinson, 2002; Åkerlund, 2004). What these studies highlight is that even though trading has stopped, different types of bonds can still exist between the former business parties. In other terms, this means that the process of disengagement has not yet come to an end.

Although there are cases where both parties wish to end the relationship, there are others where at least one party still sees the benefit of maintaining the relationship. One reason for maintaining the relationship is that ending it would cause either direct or indirect costs (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002). Acknowledging that not all relationships are worth maintaining, Tähtinen and Vaaland (2006:14) argue that there is an abundance of evidence that most business relationships are worth salvaging. The authors arrive at five different reasons for why it can be worth saving a relationship. The *first* reason is that already made investments will otherwise be lost. These investments can vary from physical adaptations in products and production facilities, to more immaterial aspects of investments like trust, commitment, and knowledge (Tähtinen & Vaaland, 2006). The *second* reason to restore a relationship depends on the dissolution process costs, e.g. legal costs for handling the relationship ending, but also on potential costs for internal reorganization (*ibid*.). The *third* reason relates to potential sanctions for future business, which can be simplified as “bad Word-of-Mouth”, or even the threat of economic sanctions; while the *fourth* reason consists of network limitations, i.e. lack of other potential partners (*ibid*.). Finally, the *fifth* reason to restore a relationship depends on the set-up costs for new relationships. It is quite possible that some of these reasons are valid when the relationship has an end-date, i.e. in the project setting.

As mentioned earlier, projects are designed to end, and, therefore, so are the relationships between firms taking part in the project. Thus, the temporary organization with its connections to its environment (i.e. the business relationships) can be assumed to end when the project is ended. Despite this, we have found that there are business relationships that survive the project ending. The question which arises is: "What characterizes the business relationships that continue after a project ending?" The network view on business relationships, including the relationship disengagement literature, may provide us with some clues, but to attempt to answer this question we will now move on to a description of our methodology and empirical material.

3. Methodology

The discussion in this paper is based on a study of the relationship connections between two Swedish construction projects, here named *Project Stockholm*, built in 1996, and *Project Uppsala*, built in 1997. The two projects are related through the fact that it is one company, a large Swedish retailer firm, which in both cases ordered a commercial building from the same building constructor. For both projects, similar lists of detailed requirements, concerning both function and appearance, were used. The commercial buildings are thus similar to each other, but not identical, e.g. they are of different size, and the foundations were done in different ways.

The main focus is on the building constructor's relations to its material suppliers and sub-contractors. In *Project Stockholm* the building constructor engaged 16 material suppliers and 27 sub-contractors for the project, all in all 43 different companies. Out of these 43 companies, 10 were reused in *Project Uppsala*, out of which 5 were sub-contractors and 5 were material suppliers.

In *Project Stockholm*, data was collected in two different ways: (1) through open-ended personal interviews with people involved from the building constructor side and, (2) through structured personal interviews with the suppliers and sub-contractors involved. The eight open-ended interviews, which were conducted first, involved people that were active during the different phases of the construction project. An interview was also conducted with the architect. The purpose of this procedure was to gain an overall picture of the construction project and identify the involved suppliers and sub-contractors. In the structured personal interviews, which were

conducted with the 30 most important suppliers and sub-contractors, we used a partly standardized questionnaire covering both the content of the interaction process during the project and earlier experiences. The questionnaire included questions regarding important characteristics of the supplier/sub-contractor and questions concerning connected relationships.

In *Project Uppsala*, the building constructor engaged in total 38 material suppliers and sub-contractors. Here personal open-ended interviews were conducted with two people directly involved in the construction project; the production manager and a person dealing with purchasing matters. The purpose of the interviews was to compare the two construction projects regarding the suppliers and sub-contractors involved.

4. The Empirical Base

A construction project involves normally many companies of different types. This was the case also in the two construction projects that are in focus here (in *Project Stockholm* totally 43 material suppliers and sub-contractors, and in *Project Uppsala* totally 38 material suppliers and sub-contractors). Due to the tendering procedures even more companies were involved during the initial faces of the projects. As the sub-contractors and material suppliers were chosen through a tendering procedure, it meant that the building constructor asked for offers from several companies for each part of the building. In *Project Stockholm*, some 10-15 companies were asked to offer for each part. This means that several hundreds of companies were asked to make an offer. Normally, not all companies make offers. One reason may be that they are busy with other projects and do not have free production capacity. Another reason can be that the building is located too far away and the transport costs therefore would become too high.

The two commercial buildings, i.e. the results of *Project Stockholm* and *Project Uppsala*, are located about 100 kilometres from each other, and we could thus have expected that several of the involved suppliers and sub-contractors would have been the same in both the projects – especially since the buildings were constructed by the same building constructor, for the same customer, and for a similar purpose (a commercial building). However, even though the building constructor is the same company, the buildings are located in different regions. Since the building constructor's organisation is divided in different regions that work rather independently

from each other, different parts of the building constructor company were involved in the two projects, and thus none of the individuals who were involved in *Project Stockholm* became involved in *Project Uppsala*. When the planning work started for *Project Uppsala*, however, the production manager in Uppsala visited the building site in Stockholm and met with the manager in charge of the Stockholm project. As expressed by the production manager: *"in this way we got thoughts transferred"*.

In the end, ten companies (five sub-contractors and five material suppliers) of those who were involved in *Project Stockholm* became involved in *Project Uppsala*. All of these companies had also done business with the building constructor even before *Project Stockholm*. What could be the reason for these ten business relationships surviving the end of *Project Stockholm*? As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2 (column "Number of Possible Alternative Suppliers"), for each of the ten companies there were competitors (alternative suppliers) that the building constructor could have chosen instead. In three cases, it was the company that had ordered the building (owner) who had requirements regarding the choice of products. For example, the owner wanted to give a similar look to the interior of the building and thus wanted to have the same type of floor tiles in both buildings. The question is, if the only reason for why the remaining seven companies were chosen is the fact that they were able to offer the lowest prices (again), or are there some specific characteristics in the product, or in the relationship between the parties, that made the parties re-activate the business relationship? These are some of the questions that will be addressed below.

Table 1 below shows that none of the five sub-contractors had a contract with the building constructor. However, the column "Product Characteristics" indicates that the five products supplied by the sub-contractors are "unique" in the meaning that these types of products are always adapted according to the customers' requirements since, for example, the building framework that conditions other parts is unique for each building. Hence, even though the components included in these products are standard, the end product is more or less "unique". This puts certain requirements on the sub-suppliers. For example, in the case of floor-laying (No. 5), the people who lay the floor need to adapt their work to the drawings and must be able to work quickly. Since no other work with the building can be done during the floor-laying, it is important that the floor is laid as fast as possible. The people who laid the floor here were working only with this, and thus travelled from one building site to another.

Table 1 The Five Sub-contractors

Sub-contractor	*Type of Product*	*Number of Possible Alternative Suppliers*	*Owner's Requirements regarding Choice of Product*	*Product Characteristics*	*Type of Relationship to the Building Constructor*
1	Frame of steel including assemblage	11-14	-	Unique product in the meaning that each framework is build according to the customer requirements.	Has done business before. No contract.
2	Loading platforms and doors including assemblage	6-7	Owner wanted to have the same product.	Unique product in the meaning that each loading platform is build according to the customer requirements.	About 5 deals per year since some years back. No contract.
3	Grating (for doors) including assemblage	10	-	Unique product in the meaning that each grating is build according to the customer requirements.	Has done business before. No contract.
4	Folding wall including assemblage	13	-	Unique product in the meaning that each folding wall is build according to the customer requirements.	About 30-40 deals per year. No contract.
5	Floor tiles including floor-laying	6	Owner wanted to have the same product.	Unique product in the meaning that each floor is laid according to the customer requirements. Often the floor-laying must be done fast which means that special knowledge how to do it is needed.	Has done business before. No contract.

When we instead look at the five material suppliers (Table 2), we find that all these products are standard products and no adaptations were needed. However, there are four companies (No. 6, 8, 9 and 10 in the table) that have some type of contract with the building constructor. In the fifth case, the parties have made about 30 deals per year since 1988 (see Table 2). Thus, the contracts and the long-lasting business relationships are probably the reasons why these companies became involved in Project Uppsala as well.

Table 2 The Five Material Suppliers

Material Supplier	*Type of Product*	*Number of Possible Alternative Suppliers*	*Owner's Requirements regarding Choice of Product*	*Product Characteristics*	*Type of Relationship to the Building Constructor*
6	Prefabricated joists	4-5	-	Standard product. No product adaptations were needed.	Has done business before. Some type of contract exists.
7	Fire-ventilation	4-5	Owner wanted to have the same product.	Standard product. No product adaptations were needed.	About 30 deals per year since 1988. No contract.
8	Steel doors	4	-	Standard product. No product adaptations were needed.	Does business continuously. Long-term contract since 1970
9	Carpets	*	-	Standard product. No product adaptations were needed.	Contract exists.
10	Kitchenette	*	-	Standard product. No product adaptations were needed	Contract exists.

* No interviews were conducted with these two companies. The reason is that they sell standard products that are of minor importance for the building as a whole. There are therefore many possible alternative suppliers. In addition, the total cost of these products in relation to the total cost of the building is of very little importance.

Next we will discuss possible reasons for why business relationships with clear end-dates continue to exist.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Both the two building projects we have studied here involved many different type of companies. First, the company that ordered the buildings was the same in both projects. This was also the case regarding the building constructor. However, as the buildings are located in different cities and the building constructor has separate parts of its organization that are responsible for these cities, it was different individuals who were involved in the project from the building constructor's side. The building constructor engaged totally 43 different companies for the *Project Stockholm* and 38 companies for the *Project Uppsala*. Of these companies, ten were the same in both projects (five sub-contractors and five material suppliers). In both cases, the building constructor used a tendering procedure, and one way to

explain the re-activation of the business relationships would be to say that the companies were able to offer a lower price than their competitors. In each case there are several possible alternative suppliers. But is the lowest price the only reason for the re-activation?

If we look at the products supplied by the five material suppliers, we see that they are standard products, and that no product adaptations or specific investments were made vis-à-vis the building constructor during the projects. Thus, these relationships cannot be characterised in the way that long-lasting business relationships often are described; through mutual adaptations, co-operation, and institutionalisation (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Therefore, the reason for the re-activation of these five relationships cannot be that a close relationship had developed between the parties over time due to adaptations in products. However, we can see that in four of the relationships some type of contract existed between the building and the material suppliers and in the fifth relationship the parties had done business with each other since 1988. Thus, some type of bond (legal or social) existed in all these relationships that may be one explanation for the re-activation. This means that even though the product as such is standard, it becomes a specific product vis-à-vis other products, as it is always included. The steel doors are an example of a standard product that in this building constructor's buildings has become a specific product (contract since 1970). This means that other companies' products must be adapted to this product.

A similar situation can be found among the five sub-contractors, where all had done business with the building constructor also before the two projects that have been investigated in this study. One difference is that the sub-contractors deliver a unique product in the meaning that their product is made according to the building constructor's requirements. However, the product is not unique in the sense that no one else can supply the components that it is made up of. In three of the cases it was the owner of the commercial building who wanted to have a specific product, delivered by a certain sub-contractor. Thus, these products became specific vis-à-vis other products through the activities performed at the project sites even though they were standard products.

What we can see from the projects we have studied is that some business relationships with a clear end-date can survive the end of a project. Tähtinen & Vaaland (2006) find five reasons why business relationships should be restored: (1) lost relational investments, (2) dissolution process costs, (3) possible sanctions for future business, (4) network limitations, and (5) set-

up costs. In our study, we do not find much evidence of these reasons. There might be some relational investments made, but there are no dissolution process costs, no sanctions for future business since and rather low sep up costs involved since the whole structure is designed for project and relationship endings. Neither is there support for network limitations as the reason for lasting relationships, since there were alternative suppliers available for all ten products. Instead, we have found a sixth type of reason, namely different types of *network dependencies* that have emerged over time between the companies. There are dependencies between the different types of companies that are involved in the construction project:

- between suppliers of parts and sub-contractors
- between the different sub-contractors
- between the sub-contractors and the building constructor
- between the sub-contractors and the material suppliers
- between the material suppliers and the building constructor and
- between the owner of the building and the building constructor.

These dependencies stem partly from existing contracts, leading to certain products being used together with others, thereby creating knowledge about both the counterparts (as well as creating trust and commitment) and how their products interact with other products (technological knowledge). The particular preferences of the owner create dependencies between the owner and the sub-contractors and suppliers that are included in the project.

One would expect the relationships characterised by network dependencies to be activated also in coming projects. This would then imply that they are long-term business relationship although they have an end-date in each building project. Thus, the industry characteristic of short-term projects-based market-transaction seems to co-exist with more long-term relationships that last between projects and network dependencies.

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